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ABSTRACT

One of the primary aspects of a reporting system is to maintain consistency between what is taught, what is tested, and what is reported to parents. This paper explores one school district's experience in changing how student progress is reported to parents for the elementary division from kindergarten to grade five. Over the last decade, what was being taught was not reflected on the report card. The change process and the new report design are both presented. A committee was formed which included teachers, parents, and administrators. A time line was established. The committee reviewed relevant literature and examined report cards from other school districts. The first year included the steps of exploration of ideas, developing common themes, a reporting system philosophy and beliefs, and developing skill areas for the progress report. During the second year, an initial design was created, debated, and tested. Parent meetings were held to explain the new format. Many teacher team meetings were used to refine ideas. After the first distribution of the new design, a survey was taken of parents and teachers. Additional revisions were made in the third year; and surveys indicate positive reactions and general satisfaction. (Author/EMK)

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ED 425 407

Report Cards: Stepping Away from Tradition.

Sharon L. Whittle

Why Change the Reporting System?

One of the primary aspects of a reporting system is to maintain consistency between what is taught, what is tested, and what is reported to parents. Over the last decade, what was being taught was not reflected on the report card. It was increasingly difficult to assess student progress in some subject areas with a traditional numerical percentage grade from zero to one hundred. Process writing is an example of a subject in which teachers were experiencing a dilemma in grading. It was inaccurate to assign a numerical percentage to reflect a student's written piece.

Parents began to ask for more information about their child's achievement in each subject area. One letter grade derived from averaging test scores did not portray accurate information. In addition, grading varied among teachers depending upon testing practices. Consistency was difficult to maintain from classroom to classroom. Students and parents were not clear about expectations from one subject area to another.

This paper will highlight one school district's experience in changing how student progress is reported to parents. The York Suburban School District enrolls 2,300 (kindergarten through grade 12) and is located 25 miles south of the state capital of Harrisburg, and 100 miles north of Washington, DC. Parents are actively involved in their children's education, 80 percent who are bound for college. The teaching staff is stable with an average of 18 years teaching experience. The York Suburban teachers are interested in providing more information to parents, showing students' growth over a period of time, and assessing growth in a more accurate context than numerical percentages derived from averages. It was time to examine and reassess the reporting system for students in the elementary division of kindergarten to grade five.

Planning

A literature search was generated to obtain current information regarding grading practices. It is important to establish a common base of information for the committee. Prior experiences and prejudices must be deferred in order

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to have the freedom for new ideas to be suggested and cultivated.

A statewide request for existing report cards utilized by other school districts in Pennsylvania was initiated. Another school district's experience might benefit our search.

The reporting system committee was formed to include teachers, parents, and administrators. For an encompassing decision such as grading, it was decided to make the committee membership as broad based as possible. The Parent Teacher Association in each elementary school selected the parents to participate. To gather information about views on the current report card, a survey of parents and teachers was distributed. Respondents were asked for items to be deleted, continued, or added to the report card. Results were tallied for future reference.

Time Line

The time line for the new report card was estimated to be three to five years. The first year included the steps of exploration of ideas, developing common themes, a reporting system philosophy and beliefs, and developing skill areas for the progress report.

During the second year, an initial design was initiated, debated and tested. Parent meetings were held to explain the new format. Many teacher team meetings were used to refine ideas.

After the first distribution of the new design, another survey was taken of the parents and teachers. The next set of revisions was initiated for the third year.

We are completing the third year of the project. Some additional revisions are being made for next year. Overall, surveys have indicated positive reactions and satisfaction with the clarity of the report from parents and teachers.

Process

Changing a traditional reporting system is a difficult journey to take since teachers and parents have strong opinions of grading based upon their previous experiences. In order to insure a long lasting and permanent change in the philosophy of a reporting system, a process approach was utilized at York Suburban School District. The process includes five steps.

1. Exploring Phase

During the first meeting it was crucial to establish the purpose and method of operating. The first focus was to revise the current report card. Members were given the responsibility of being the liaison to the group they represented. They were taught the process of brainstorming ideas and consensus building.Cooperative group techniques were utilized for discussion. Group roles were outlined and group composition continually changed to avoid power cliques. Committee members needed to experience a change in their beliefs toward assessment practices. A common

knowledge base was formed from research articles which led to common themes.

2. Deciding Phase

- Common themes and ideas led to the development of a philosophy of our reporting system with guiding beliefs. Establishment of a philosophy and guiding beliefs provides the building blocks for change. When the new format is questioned, the beliefs help to support the new progress report.
- The reporting system philosophy states that each student is unique, capable of learning, and entitled to attain his or her greatest potential which follows our school district vision statement. Several changes were developed. First, teachers were empowered to express their professional judgment about academic performance. Second, the new progress report would be a summary of student performance, and only one element of the entire reporting system.
- More specific details were listed in the guiding beliefs. Assessment of student performance would be with a variety of methods. Knowledge would not be assessed in only a right or wrong format. As an example, teachers would summarize observable data to show growth over time in reading fluency, writing proficiency, and speaking ability. Student learning will be conveyed with more than a single grade and include process, product, and performance.
- Skill lists for each subject area were developed. Preferred categories were suggested for the new design. Teachers began to develop observational data sheets (referred to as "clipboard cruising") to collect student learning information for each category.

3. Designing Phase

Taking the list of preferred categories to design the actual format can best be completed by one person. Various designs can be reviewed by the committee to reach a consensus on a prototype.

4. Review Phase

The new progress report format was implemented during the second year of the project. Teacher staff development, parent informational meetings, and surveys were conducted. It is important to understand the change process during this phase: the vision and philosophy must be constantly restated to avoid confusion. Training is a necessary component to relieve anxiety for teachers and parents, and teaching the techniques to collect information for the progress report helps alleviate teacher frustration.

5. Completion Phase

A survey of parents and teachers yielded additional revisions for the third year of the project. The progress report is now designed to be reviewed yearly in order to reflect what is currently being taught.

New Progress Report Design

The school year has 185 days, and is organized into thirds, with a progress report sent to parents after each 62-day period. The progress report is a summary of student learning, and one component of the entire reporting system. After the first 32 school days, a parent/student/teacher conference is required to review the student portfolio, share teachers' observations, and set goals for the year.

Curriculum

Language Arts is a major category on the progress report which includes skills in the areas of reading, speaking, and writing. Skill categories include observation of independent reading, understanding of text, following written directions, and understanding vocabulary. The level of reading is marked as (a) independent (without assistance), (b) guided (some assistance), or, (c) dependent (frequent assistance). Speaking shows how the student expresses ideas and participates in discussions. Writing includes the ability to write independently, organize ideas, choose appropriate words, and mechanics of writing.

Mathematics shows the student's knowledge of basic facts, computation, concepts, and problem solving skills. Social studies, and science/health areas describe the student's understanding of basic facts and application of concepts in discussions and projects. Related arts comprise the subject areas of art, music, physical education, and library science.

Under each curricular area, the student receives an assessment for each skill instead of one grade to summarize the entire subject. A sentence designating if assignments are completed in a timely and satisfactory manner is included for each subject.

Progress Scale

Assessment categories are no longer defined on the sole basis of a percentage grade. Student achievement may be in one of four categories. The lowest category is designated by a numeral ***one*** and means minimal progress with significant guidance and support. The next category of ***two*** shows progress is developing with guidance and support. The category of ***three*** demonstrates capable progress with successful work and minimal support. The top category of ***four*** represents significant progress with independent work.

Work Habits and Social Development

Skills such as following directions, completing work, neatness, effort, and working in groups comprise the area of work habits. Social Development consists of self control, getting along with others, obeying rules, respect, responsibility, and courteous behavior. Each skill is judged and placed in one of following three categories: (a) the student consistently demonstrates, (b) adequately demonstrates, or, (c) occasionally demonstrates.

Comments

An extensive comment section is provided for detailed feedback on student behavior and effort for each subject. Comments are organized into categories of adaptations in curriculum, instruction, or assessment, achievement, effort, assignments/homework, work habits, behavior, and attendance.

The dilemma faced in providing teacher comments is one of available time. Parents prefer a longer narrative from teachers about their child's progress. The amount of time to write lengthy descriptions of each student's achievement is an area of concern for teachers. We are currently using a number notation system that refers to specific behaviors. The numbers are to save time for teachers, but the system is awkward. Development of a computerized report would provide typed comments for each skill area without using numbers.

Cautions

1. Following a process approach is difficult for people, the tendency is to jump to the end result immediately. It becomes necessary to constantly restate each phase of the process and the direction of the committee. Establishing a philosophy and guiding beliefs is strongly encouraged.
2. Decision making for teachers with parents on the committee is new and demanding. Time must be taken to encourage participation.
3. Recognition of the teachers' continuum of knowledge and experience is necessary. Extensive staff development is crucial to the process of change.
4. Communication must be developed between meetings. Visits to each building and discussions with each group represented promotes consensuses.
5. A long recess in the schedule, such as summer vacation, can impede the progress of the committee.
6. Administrators in each school building need to keep a positive and united front.

Summary

Inviting parents to participate in a decision making committee at the beginning of the process was a new step for the school district. Parents who served on the committee were fundamental components to promoting the new progress report.

Committee members are proud of their accomplishment and continue with their enthusiasm as we enter the fourth year. Parents, teachers, and students are pleased with the new format. The new progress report met our need to provide more information to parents in an appropriate format.

Reporting System Change Process

EXPLORING PHASE
- Opinions
- Perceptions
- Facts

DECIDING PHASE
- Beliefs on Reporting
- Information Needs
- Purpose of Report Cards
- Grading Practices
- Style of Communicating
- Likes & dislikes

DESIGNING PHASE
- Preferred elements
- Style and shape
- Effectiveness
- Technology
- Flexibility

REVIEW PHASE
- Format developed
- Pilot test

COMPLETION
- Redesign
- Final format

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